

Emma Larkin. *Secret Histories: Finding George Orwell in a Burmese Teashop*. London: John Murray. 2004.

Emma Larkin's *Secret Histories: Finding George Orwell in a Burmese Teashop* begins with her discovery that Orwell has the reputation in Burma of being a "prophet" due to his three most famous books: *Burmese Days*, *Animal Farm*, and *Nineteen-Eighty-Four*. According to Larkin, "It is a particularly uncanny twist of fate that these three novels effectively tell the story of Burma's recent history" (p. 2). Larkin explains that the oppression of the entire population in Burma was "completely hidden from view" by information control carefully yet invisibly planted in every corner of Burma and cemented by the "vast network of Military Intelligence spies and their informers" and the "threat of torture and imprisonment." Larkin admits that the fear that ordinary Burmese face everyday was beyond imagination for an outsider and fits well with the psychological, social, and political landscape of Orwell's novels, which "explore the idea of individuals being trapped within their environment, controlled by their family, the society around them or an all-powerful government" (p. 4). Larkin's fascination with Orwell was further strengthened when she found that Orwell in his final days was trying to write another novel about Burma under the title of "A Smoking Room Story." Generally, Larkin's familiarity with Orwell's writings is impressive, bringing into the discussion other writings by Orwell including *The Road to Wigan Pier*, *Homage to Catalonia*, *The Clergyman's Daughter*, *Shooting an Elephant*, and *A Hanging*.

Although many researchers of Orwell underestimate the significance of his experience in Burma, Larkin suggests that Orwell's years in Burma provided a strong foundation for the perspectives that fueled his writing. Larkin thus embarked on a trip to Burma to "experience Burma as Orwell knew it" which she believed possible because "almost half a century of military dictatorship has given it the air of a country frozen in time" (p. 4). Larkin discovered, however, a much more bitter reality in contemporary Burma, "a real-life Nineteen Eighty-Four where Orwell's nightmare visions are being played out with a grueling certainty" (p. 4).

Larkin's story is based on her own interviews with students, former prisoners, publishers, intellectuals, refugees, and members of the Anglo-Burmese minority, as well as those who approached her, on their own initiative, with their own accounts. Larkin is fluent in Burmese and this is a real strength of the book, for she is fully able to grasp the reality and essence of life in Burma vividly through stories told by her interviewees. Larkin then weaves each of their stories into Orwell's world in which the life under a totalitarian regime where people (as well as animals) were constantly under Big Brother's surveillance and those who opposed the government faced severe torture. Chapters are divided according to the cities (Mandalay, the Delta region, Rangoon, Moulmein, and Katha) where Orwell spent his life in colonial Burma as one of the officers of the Imperial Police Force in the 1920s. In order to understand Orwell's life in Burma and how his experience influenced his writing, Larkin attempted to find locals who knew Orwell or his family and the houses where he resided or the buildings where he might have visited during his residence. In doing so, a parallel theme emerges in the story of Burma today as told by the people she interviewed.

In Chapter One, Larkin visited the last royal capital of Burma, Mandalay, where Orwell began his colonial career studying at the police training school. Larkin visited the colonial hill station of Maymyo (today, Pyin-Oo-Lwin), northeast of Mandalay, which Orwell had described as a nostalgic place reminding him of his English homeland. In both places, Larkin tells us that remnants of Orwell's Burma still linger. The building that housed the police training school, for example, is still being used to the present. Larkin locates the remains of Orwell's days in the building's haunted room in which a young, lonely British officer committed suicide, in the old colonial hotel built in "impressive mock-Tudor-style" in Maymyo, in the hotel restaurant's menu, and the dusty bar where British officers once drank the day (and night) away. But these are mere glimpses of another time. All that remains, Larkin finds, are derelict buildings, abandoned rooms, and many ghosts. This corresponds to the present condition of her interviewees, especially their dismal living conditions, the government having forgotten to take care of them.

In Chapter Two, Larkin visited the Delta region, a mud land and a mosquito heaven where no British colonial officers had wanted to dwell for very long. It was so miserable that one Burmese author whom Larkin talked with even believes that Orwell's experience in Delta was the catalyst for his transformation into an author ruled by pessimism. While in the Delta region, Orwell was posted at Myaungmya and Twante. From her research at the India Office Records (British Library), Larkin discovered that the time during which Orwell was stationed here was one of the most unsettling times for the British in Burma. Violence and crime, always attributed, correctly or incorrectly, to the "dacoits" was at its peak, making Burma "the most violent corner of the Indian Empire." According to Larkin, Orwell's superiors at both stations were famous "crime-busters" who were also skilled in shooting. Larkin suggests that this harsh colonial reality, witnessed first hand by Orwell, raised his doubts about the beneficial aspects of the imperial system.

Today, Orwell might have been just as wary of government rule in the Delta region. Larkin tells us that Burma's Big Brother is fully at work here, even in remote Myaungmya. Her arrival was reported immediately to the Military Intelligence (MI) and they swiftly appeared to investigate her purpose for visiting this town. Although Burma's Military Intelligence's method is not high-tech, Larkin assures the reader that "it is just as efficient." Larkin continually asked her friends how to distinguish MI agents or their informants from other people and the answers she collected reveal that everyone has their own method for doing so, ranging "from the ludicrous to the arcane." What becomes clear is that the peoples' preoccupation with the ubiquity of this secret network, and the belief that they are watched constantly in their daily lives, runs so deep that they are trapped in a state of paranoia. As one of her Burmese friends remarked, "it doesn't make any difference whether they have informers or not. It is enough that we believed that their informers are everywhere. After that, we start to do their work for them" (p. 63).

In Chapter Three, Larkin focuses on her experiences in Rangoon in the midst of the removal of the FEC (Foreign Exchange Certificate) from the market. Larkin's discussions with a Burmese friend reveals how the information-deprived people in Burma, at the time of special economic or political changes, have learned how to live safely by analyzing every available source of information, especially reading between the lines. Larkin's friend, Ko Ye, for example, explained to her that the Burmese were "experts at looking for what's not there" and they pay attention to what is missing because that absence is the key to tell the truth" (p.132). Ko Ye gave an example of the time of Burma's banking crisis when articles on the banking system suddenly disappeared from the leading economic magazines. That was an indicator that something big must be happening in the banking system. Further, Ko Ye informed Larkin that the Burmese do not miss any small change happening around them in their everyday life, because these slight changes are also great indicators and telltale signs of concealed events. Ko Ye's explanation of how to survive includes some measure of pride, since he discusses such a strategy in terms of a match of wit between the government and the people. Nevertheless, Larkin explains that she felt she was becoming immediately paranoid after adopting this 'Burmese' way of life, suggesting to the reader how mentally demanding it is to survive in a society where one has to watch everything constantly.

Chapter Four focuses on Moulmein, where Orwell's mother grew up and where he served in 1926 as the chief of the police headquarters. Larkin attempts to understand how Orwell's views, as a representative of the colonial empire, on racism began to tremble from time to time as Flory does in Orwell's *Burmese Days*. Larkin was interested in Orwell's ambivalence to racism, as he believed it to be a quintessential element of colonial society, yet was deeply appalled with colonial rhetoric that sustained it. Larkin's research on Orwell's life in Moulmein led her to an interesting fact that Orwell might have had an Anglo-Burmese cousin whom he never mentioned in his writings, which would complicate attempts to interpret Orwell's views on racism. Larkin further analyzed Orwell's ambivalence as revealed in his "love and hate relationship" with Kipling as well as in Orwell's essay, *Shooting an Elephant*. In *Shooting an Elephant*, Larkin explains, "Orwell writes how he was trapped between his own resentment toward the Empire and the Burmese peoples' resentment towards him" (p.177). Larkin continues this examination up to the final chapter: Katha, where Orwell was stationed and which Orwell used as a model for the setting of *Burmese Days*. Larkin concludes that Orwell had become a strong Empire hater by the time he served at Katha as he carried guilt for being a part of "the great despotic machine of empire" (p. 219). It was from this point that that Orwell's essence as a writer was born and it is this 'new' Orwell to whom contemporary Burmese relate. At the same time, Larkin does not let us forget that racism which existed in Orwell's time never disappeared but continued to take new forms, that is, the current regime's discrimination against non-Burman ethnic minorities.

Burma Studies, always representing a strange milieu of views, tends to move back and forth between engagement and disengagement with political activism and issues. Academics appear much more silent today on the negative aspects of the regime and the Burmese situation than several years ago, while expressions of sympathy or apology for the regime and its policies seem to be increasing. Critics, perhaps a silent majority, might be more cautious today because of disagreement on how to resolve Burma's current situation, admission of the futility of evoking change, fear of jeopardizing the safety of friends in Burma, or various professional risks. Whatever the reasons, this reviewer finds Larkin's attempts to remind us of the precarious life of Burma's population courageous.

One cannot help but feel sympathy for the Burmese in the face of the book's many stories of hardship and desperation. These stories may not contribute new information about the general living conditions of the Burmese population. Reports and other information made available by Amnesty International and the WHO, as well as numerous other international organizations (not to mention the Western press) have made this situation abundantly, even numbingly clear. Judging the book on these terms would be a superficial reading. The real value of this book does not lie in providing familiar stories but in putting them into a new context. Seemingly endless accounts of hardship told by the people whom Larkin interviewed help the reader to understand how the essence of Animal

Farm and Nineteen Eighty-Four was so evident in Burma, not just in Orwell's time, but also in the present. As Larkin argues, this is the reason why the Burmese consider Orwell as a prophet of the emergence of Burma as it is today and as their storyteller and this is why stories of peoples' lives in contemporary Burma dwell on Orwell's writings and overlap with Orwell's protagonists. This is a fine book, recommended for both the general readership and academics interested in a people whose daily lives leave much to be desired.

Atsuko Naono

Research Associate, School of Oriental and African Studies